

DANGEROUS ENCHANTMENT

BY ANNE WEALE

She was the heart of the home—the quiet, capable sister they all relied upon.

Nobody guessed the passionate conflict between her dreams and her sense of responsibility . . .

IN the eight months they had known each other, Paul had never kissed her. Not even under the mistletoe at Christmas. Now, without warning, he was pulling her against him, his mouth hard on hers.

Caught off balance as she turned from the kitchen cupboard—the coffee grinder in one hand, a jar of beans in the other—Clodagh had no chance to resist him. But the surprise was a pleasant one.

“Darling Clo . . . you are going to marry me, aren’t you?” Paul’s voice was husky, his lips still very close to hers.

Clodagh opened her eyes, blinked, and drew gently away from him. “Paul, I don’t know,” she murmured breathlessly.

Her heart was beating fast. She felt excited, confused, a little dizzy. But she had felt just the same after being kissed by that tall Hungarian student in Switzerland during that wonderfully carefree last term at the catering school in Zürich.

Paul took the grinder and the bean jar, and set them on the big deal-topped table, bleached white by daily scrubbing. Then, with her hands in his, he said

quietly, "I love you, Clo. You must have guessed the way I feel about you. Don't tell me 'This is so sudden'."

"But it is, Paul. No, please"—as he tried to take her in his arms again—"wait a minute. I—I can't think straight when you're kissing me."

His blue eyes twinkled, and he grinned. "Why think then?"

With his thick fair hair and fresh complexion, he looked younger than he was. There were occasions when his manner, or some reference to the past, would remind her that he was twelve years older than she was. Otherwise Clodagh—who had given up a career in *Haute Cuisine* to look after her two small brothers when their parents had died and now often felt like a careworn housewife—seldom thought about the difference in their ages. A more important disparity between them was that Paul was basically a simple and rather phlegmatic sort of person.

Paul never lost his temper. Paul was always cheerful and optimistic. So was Clodagh—outwardly. Her dark moods she kept to herself. Paul was essentially a realist. Clodagh dreamed impossible dreams. He might be an ardent lover, but she doubted if he would be a romantic and imaginative one. With his own feet so firmly on the ground, how could he sweep her off hers?

"Look, my dear, I'm not a fool," he said, his expression growing serious again. "I have a pretty shrewd idea what is worrying you."

"Have you, Paul?" she said doubtfully.

He released her hands, and moved away. "You aren't in love with me," he said evenly. "That is, not in the way you think you ought to be in love. The first time we met you didn't feel instant palpitations. It hasn't struck sparks when I've touched you."

"Oh, Paul, I'm not quite so idiotic . . ." she began indignantly.

"I'm not saying you are," he cut in. "But, like most girls, you expect love to be something cataclysmic. Anything less dramatic isn't good enough." His smile was amused and indulgent. "Well, it's true, isn't it?"

Clodagh bit her lip. Put like that, it sounded so absurdly adolescent. Yet that, in essence, was precisely what she did believe of love. If it wasn't overwhelming, irrefutable—well, it wasn't the real thing. Not knowing how to answer him, she began pouring coffee beans into the grinder.

"No, leave all that for a moment," he said impatiently. "I've asked you to marry me. Will you?"

Clodagh fidgeted with the lid of the jar. "You really mean that? When you know I don't feel . . . as you said?" she asked, in a low voice.

"I mean it." Paul's tone was almost curt.

"You may think so now . . ." she began nervously.

Again he cut her short. "My dear girl, I am not exactly a callow youth. At thirty-five I ought to know what I'm doing, don't you think? And I'm certain that, if you marry me, we can make a good life together and be very happy. These grand passions are not all they're cracked up to be, I fancy."

There was a pause while he stood by the table watching her, and Clodagh tried to come to a decision. It was true that his proposal was not a bombshell. Yet, after weeks in which to weigh her own feelings, she was still uncertain what to say to him.

If she said "No," because affection and respect did not add up to love as she believed in it, then that would be the end of their relationship.

If she said "Yes," then by tomorrow night there would be an announcement in the local evening paper, and the whole course of her future would be settled and secure. And, as Mrs. Paul Bentley, she would not only have the life of most girls' dreams, but she would also be able to smooth all her family's difficulties.

The rasp of a match roused her from her abstraction. Paul was lighting a cigarette, his fingers slightly unsteady. Clodagh had never known him so unsure of himself before—

Paul must have seen the sudden affection in her eyes because he said, "Clo, when I kissed you . . . you enjoyed it, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did," she agreed shyly.

"Listen to me, Clo," he went on urgently. "If you'll marry me, we'll go to Majorca for our honeymoon. I have a friend who will lend us his villa. And when we're alone together, darling, and I can make love to you properly, you'll feel as—as romantic as you want to feel. You won't be disappointed, I promise you."

A honeymoon in Majorca. Mediterranean sunlight instead of the darkness and gloom of this endless winter. And, after the honeymoon, the return to Paul's big house. No more worrying over bills, no more need for so many pettifogging economies. New clothes. Being cared for, cherished . . .

"Oh, darling, say you will. Please, Clo . . . please."

She was in his arms again, and he was caressing her, kissing her eyelids. How could she refuse him when he loved her, and had so much to offer?

But, on the very brink of surrender, Clodagh forced herself to resist. "Paul, you must give me time to think."

He held her for a moment longer, then slowly released her. He sighed. "Very well—but do remember, Clo, that I can't live on tenterhooks indefinitely."

After he had gone, and she had peeped into her younger brothers' rooms, Clodagh did not go to her own bedroom, but went down to the kitchen again.

She had been up at six and it was now nearly eleven, but she had one of her sudden urges to cook something. If she did go to bed she would only lie awake thinking, worrying. She would make some buns for the boys. It would calm her.

There had never been any doubt about Clodagh's *métier*. As a little girl, her favourite toy had been a miniature stove, her greatest treat to be allowed to "make pastry"—rolling and re-rolling a left-over lump of increasingly grubby shortcrust. Now, cooking was never a chore to her.

She was buttoning an overall over her one good dinner dress when the telephone rang. It was her sister Deirdre, calling from London.

"Have I dragged you out of bed, sweetie?" her sister inquired.

From the noises in the background—gramophone music and a babel of voices and laughter—Clodagh guessed that Deirdre was throwing a party.

"No, I wasn't in bed. I've been out this evening," Clodagh said.

"One of your jobs? Or a date with Old Faithful?" Deirdre asked.

Thinking of the cost of the call, Clodagh said briskly, "With Paul. What's up, Dee? What do you want?"

"Only to tell you that I'll be home this weekend," her sister explained. "You don't mind if I bring a friend down, do you? As a matter of fact, he is someone rather special. I thought I had better give you a few days' warning so that you can get things organised. Lay on some of your Cordon Bleu meals, will you, sweetie? I'll make up any extra you have to spend. It really is rather vital to make a good impression on him. Look, I've got to go now. See you on Friday—about eight. 'Bye, sweetie."

And before Clodagh could say, "But Dee . . . wait a minute," her sister had replaced the receiver.

At a quarter to eight on Friday evening, Clodagh surveyed the dining table with a professionally critical eye. Normally, the family ate in the kitchen.

Tonight, in honour of Deirdre's "rather special" guest, Clodagh had switched on the fire in the dining-room, and brought out a set of delicate lace table mats. and the precious Minton dinner service.

That morning a van from the town's best florist had delivered a big box of deep red carnations, with a message which Paul must have telephoned from Brussels. Clodagh had arranged the flowers in a hand-painted porcelain épergne.

Clodagh lit the tall white candles. Then she stood back to admire the sheen of the four Waterford crystal goblets and the old-fashioned silver cutlery, all of which had originally belonged to her Irish great-grandmother. Following Deirdre's instructions not to worry about expense, she had spent the previous afternoon making a large pork cheese which, served on slices of pumpernickel and garnished with curls of beetroot steeped in burgundy and sugar, was one of her own favourite *hors d'oeuvres*. Hoping that their visitor's palate would not be too conservative, she had decided that a *risotto* with chicken livers and tomatoes Provençale would be a warming and satisfying main dish. And, finally, if their guest did not care for baked figs, he could have some of the delicious Brie which she had bought that morning on one of her nowadays infrequent ventures into the town's best delicatessen shop.

But, at half-past eight, there was no sign of Deirdre and her escort.

The boys went upstairs to have baths and to read in bed until nine, and Clodagh peered anxiously at the rice which was keeping warm in the oven. Already it was past perfection.

At nine, both annoyed and rather worried, she turned off the gas and put the chicken livers back in the pantry. The *risotto* was spoiled. When they did turn up, they would have to make do with an omelet.

After saying goodnight to the boys, Clodagh made herself a snack and some coffee, consumed it, and went into the sitting-room to wait for the telephone to ring, or for the sound of a car pulling up.

She must have fallen asleep because when she heard voices in the hall and blinked at the clock, it was after ten. The next moment Deirdre was in the room

"Hello, sweetie—are we madly late? Never mind, we had dinner at a road-

house on the way, so you needn't bother to cook anything. Coffee would be nice. How is everyone?"

"Oh, we're fine," Clodagh said dazedly, feeling twinges of cramp in one arm. Deirdre unbuttoned her flaring greatcoat of rich curry-coloured tweed to reveal a matching skirt and a fur overblouse. Her glossy, red-gold hair was wound into a sophisticated chignon, not a wisp out of place. Her make-up was flawless. She moved in an aura of delectable, expensive French perfume.

"Come in, Simon. This is my sister Clodagh. Clo . . . this is Simon Rand."

Muzzy from sleep, Clodagh had not noticed Deirdre's companion. He was standing in the shadows by the door, a tall, still figure in a raincoat. When he moved forward to shake hands with her, she saw that he was quite unlike the usual run of Deirdre's admirers.

This man was well into his thirties, with flecks of grey above his ears, and the stamp of seasoned maturity about his eyes and his wide, humorous mouth. He was as swarthy as a gypsy, with true-black hair and dark, heavy-lidded eyes.

"How do you do, Miss Devlin." His handclasp was firm and warm. "It is very good of you to put me up for the weekend. I hope our late arrival hasn't been a nuisance?"

"Oh, no, not at all," she answered untruthfully, somewhat discomposed by the intentness with which he was studying her.

"How are the boys? I've brought some un-birthday presents for them," said Deirdre, stripping off her gloves.

Clodagh gave her a surprised glance. Dee was not in the habit of bearing out-of-season gifts.

Her sister sank gracefully into a chair, clutching her large crocodile handbag. Was that enormous golden stone on her right hand a real topaz?

"Shall I help you make the coffee, pet?" Deirdre asked.

"Oh, no . . . it won't take a minute. You stay here and get warm," Clodagh said hurriedly, despising herself for the shaft of resentment she had felt.

It was horrid of her to price all Dee's accoutrements like that, she thought remorsefully, when she was in the kitchen. Her sister *had* to look elegant. It was essential to her career as a fashion model.

When ten minutes later, she carried in the coffee tray, Simon Rand sprang up to take it from her.

He had taken off his coat. He was wearing a dark grey sweater over his shirt and tie, and cavalry twill trousers. As he set the tray down for her, Clodagh wondered where her sister had met him.

"You look tired, sweetie. Don't bother to be polite. Simon won't mind if you want to get to bed early," Deirdre said kindly.

Clodagh took the hint. "Yes, I think I will go," she agreed. "Good night, Dee. Goodnight, Mr. Rand."

It was past midnight when she heard them come upstairs. Was Simon Rand "rather special" because Deirdre was beginning to fall in love with him, or was this yet another of her sister's short-lived infatuations, she wondered.

Dee changed men as often as she altered her hairstyle. She would scrawl a note to say that she had met someone who was "too madly attractive for words,

sweetie" and, a month later, she would come home for a night and appear to have forgotten his existence.

But Simon Rand did not look the type who would bask in Deirdre's favour for a few weeks and then meekly accept his dismissal, Clodagh reflected. Perhaps Dee had at last met her match.

AS soon as the alarm went off next morning, Clodagh bounced out of bed and pulled on her shabby, red woolen dressing-gown.

Hurrying along to the bathroom in the carpet slippers which made Deirdre shudder every time she saw them, Clodagh burst in.

"Oh... I'm terribly sorry. I—I didn't expect—" Her voice tailed off.

Simon Rand turned from the washbasin and smiled at her. He was in the middle of shaving, and wore a navy wool dressing-gown which was even more disreputable than hers.

"Good morning," he said pleasantly. "I won't hold you up very long."

"Oh, that's perfectly all right. I'm sorry to have barged in on you," Clodagh said, retreating.

Back in her room, she caught sight of her reflection in the mirror. Her dark hair was wildly tousled, and the legs of her pyjamas were tucked into the fleecy scarlet bedsocks which Rory had given her for Christmas.

'What a ghastly apparition,' she thought with chagrin.

When next she emerged from her room again, she was warmly but trimly dressed in olive slacks, a yellow shirt and a toffee-coloured lambswool sweater. And her hair was silky from brushing.

After rousing the boys, and washing and cleaning her teeth, she ran downstairs to make a quick batch of popovers.

Deirdre always had breakfast in bed when she was at home; and, knowing that it would take her sister at least an hour to dress, Clodagh decided to take her tray up early.

Having woken her sister and left the tray on the bedside table, Clodagh went down to the kitchen again to take out the popovers. Simon Rand was sitting in the creaky old basket chair, reading the paper.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" he asked.

"I don't think so, thanks. Would you like some of these for your breakfast, or would you rather have bacon and eggs?" Clodagh asked, taking the baking tray out of the oven and tipping the hot, golden-brown batter puffs into a napkin-lined basket.

"They look most appetising. I haven't had popovers since I was in Canada," he said, taking one of the places at the table. Then, as she handed him a jug of maple syrup, "Are you always such an early bird, Miss Devlin?"

"Well, I usually go to bed fairly early—except when I'm working."

"Working? You have a job as well as running this house?"

"I do free-lance catering," Clodagh replied. "Organising cocktail parties, cooking for dinner parties, that kind of thing."

"I see." Again he gave her that curiously intent look. She was glad when the two boys clattered downstairs and she was no longer alone with him.

SOON after Con and Rory had gone off to clean out their rabbits' hutches, Deirdre came down. This morning she had put on a topaz wool suit with a silk shirt. "What a domestic scene," she drawled, with a hint of derision. Simon had insisted on helping clear the table and was now drying dishes.

"What time would you like to have lunch, Dee?" Clodagh asked.

"Oh, Simon wants to drive over to Wednesbury to see the Abbey ruins, so we shall probably be out all day," said Deidre.

"I'm afraid I shall be out this evening. I'm booked to do a fork supper," Clodagh explained, hoping her sister would not be annoyed with her. "But I can leave a casserole in the oven."

"No, we'll try out this new Chinese restaurant and perhaps look in at one of the Saturday night hops," Deirdre decided. "But could you be an angel and press my black chiffon for me? It's in the wardrobe."

Ten minutes later, Clodagh watched them drive away, Deirdre with a dark fur beret perched on her head and a long fur scarf slung round her neck. The boys also watched, impressed by Simon's sleek, French sports car.

"Gosh, what a smashing job," said Rory, after they had gone. "He's better than Dee's usual creeps, isn't he, Clo?"

"Yes, he seems very pleasant," she agreed. "Have you two nearly finished cleaning out your rabbit hutches? If we're going to buy Con's new shoes and your blazer, we shall have to get a move on."

As she went upstairs to tidy the bedrooms, Clodagh felt another surge of irritation rising in her. Why should she press Deirdre's dress when she already had so much else to do today, and Dee had driven off looking like a millionaire's daughter and probably had not even bothered to make her bed? It wasn't fair that she and Liam should always have to bear the brunt of their circumstances, while Dee gadded about London enjoying herself. She did not even give them much financial help, and she must be earning good money now that she was appearing more and more frequently in the glossy fashion journals.

'Oh, what is the matter with me this weekend?' Clodagh thought unhappily. 'Why do I suddenly feel so cross and dissatisfied?'

CHAPTER II

WHEN, after the death of their parents Clodagh had given up her plans for a career, her eldest brother Liam—now the head of the family—had made a rule that she should stay in bed on Sunday mornings while the younger boys cooked her breakfast.

Usually this consisted of some slightly charred toast and a watery or hard-boiled egg. But, on the following morning, when Con brought her tray up at eight, Clodagh found a perfect omelet under a hot, upturned soup plate.

"We didn't make it, Simon did," said Con, as she surveyed it with delighted

surprise. "He was down before we were. I say, can we go for a run in his car this morning? He said he would take us, but we must ask you first."

Clodagh pressed a fork into the omelet's creamy centre and found it rich with finely chopped mushrooms. "What about church?" she asked.

"Oh, can't we go in the evening? When old Dee gets up she'll want him to take her out, and she won't have us around. I say, do you know what his car will do? Flat out, he can get her up to 110 m.p.h."

"All right, you can go with him—but not 'flat out,' I hope."

"Of course not, silly. He couldn't let her go on any of the roads around here. They're much too narrow and twisty," Con said scathingly. "She's made for whizzing along the motorways in France. Can I have a bit of your toast?"

"Yes, do. This omelet is delicious. How nice of Mr. Rand to make it for me."

"I'd better get down again," Con said, his voice muffled by a mouthful of lavishly buttered toast.

He looked such a tough little boy, so squarely and sturdily built, with large, clumsy hands, and a bristling ginger crew-cut and freckles. Rory, two years older, was thin and dark and bookish, more like Liam. But it was Con who was the most sensitive, the most vulnerable.

He had been nine years old that terrible summer two years ago when the parents were killed. People said that children soon got over such things. So it had seemed. A week after the disaster—Con had been rattling round the garden on his roller skates, building a house in the sycamore, whistling, shouting. But Clodagh had discovered that he often hid in the coalhouse and cried.

Remembering her own carefree childhood, she gave a long sigh. Even now, after more than two years, she found it hard to believe that she would never again hear her father shouting for coffee from his studio, or her mother's laughter.

Bran Devlin had been a brilliantly witty cartoonist. He had married Elisa when they were both art students, and they were so perfectly suited to each other, and so happy and successful, that their children had grown up with all the material advantages and an abundance of love and laughter.

In the spring two years ago, the Devlins' eldest son, Liam, had just secured a coveted research post. Deirdre was having a year in Paris, and Clodagh was in Zürich. Both the boys had been at the town's best school.

At the end of July, leaving Clodagh in charge of the youngsters, the parents had set out for a touring holiday in the Midi. "Our twenty-eighth honeymoon, sweetheart," Bran had joked.

They had never reached Provence. Driving south, they had been hit by a skidding haulage lorry. They were both killed.

At first, the tragic news had seemed like the end of the world. Clodagh remembered. Then, still numb with shock, she and Liam had been faced with the added burden of financial difficulties. Their parents had never saved much, and their father had not bothered with insurance.

However, with Liam handing over most of his salary, and she herself staying at home to cook and clean, they could, with much pinching and scraping, just manage to keep the home together. But they knew it would be a long time before Rory and Con were trained and independent. So for the past two years

Clodagh had done her best to pare their budget to a minimum. And, twelve months ago, when she had felt that the boys were old enough to be left alone in the evenings, she had devised a scheme to augment their strained resources.

Slowly at first, and then with increasing success, she had built up her private catering service. For a moderate fee, she would go to people's homes and cook anything from a formal dinner menu to a birthday tea for two-year-olds.

IT was at one of her "jobs" that she had first met Paul.

She had organised a cocktail party for his aunt, and he had insisted on driving her home. Three months later, when she had sensed that he was on the verge of falling in love with her, she had wondered if she ought to stop seeing him. But his company was so pleasant—and their outings together were her only escape from domesticity—that she had postponed making a break.

The boys had gone for their drive when she went downstairs to bake some cheese bread, and she was busy with the lunch when she heard the car coming back. Rory and Con must have gone to feed the rabbits as Simon was alone when he came into the kitchen a few minutes later.

"Good morning. May I make us both some coffee?"

"I'd love some. Dee is still in bed." Clodagh had not expected them back so soon, and had intended to make up her face when she had finished preparing lunch. She was suddenly very conscious of her lack of lipstick. "It was kind of you to take the boys out, Mr. Rand—and to cook such an excellent breakfast for me," she said shyly.

"It was a pleasure," he said, smiling. "I spend most of my life in hotels. I am enjoying myself here."

He glanced round the pleasantly old-fashioned kitchen with its massive oak dresser ranged with the brightly enamelled iron *cocottes* and earthenware *terrines* which Clodagh had brought back from the Continent. A string of Spanish onions and a thick black-skinned sausage (a Christmas present from friends in Switzerland) hung from the ceiling, and there was a formidable battery of gleaming copper *sauté* pans and steel chef's knives and choppers on hooks beside the stove. There was a smell of hot, crusty cheese bread from the loaves now set to cool on the window ledge and, when Clodagh opened the oven, the more subtle fragrance of a rich beef *ragoût* flavoured with herbs.

"My mother was a Frenchwoman," he said. "This room reminds me of the kitchen at my grandfather's place. We lived in London, but every summer we went down to the Camargue for six weeks. It's a region to the west of Marseilles where they breed bulls. I used to ride with my grandfather's herdsmen, and at noon we would go back to the farm, and my grandmother would have a huge tureen of thick vegetable soup waiting for us, and wonderful home-made *pâtés* and a cheese from the caves up in Roquefort."

"Why do you live mostly in hotels?" Clodagh asked, unable to contain her curiosity about him, and how he had come to meet Deirdre.

It might have been only fancy, but she thought he gave her rather an odd look. "I have to travel a great deal," he said. "I have a flat in London, but I'm rarely

there for more than a couple of weeks at a time. Rory tells me you studied catering in Zürich. Did you learn to ski while you were in Switzerland?"

"I tried it, but I never got beyond the nursery slopes," she said ruefully.

Why did he travel? she wondered. It seemed strange that he had not mentioned his job. Perhaps he hadn't one. Perhaps he did not need to work for his living. Yet he did not look the kind of man who idled through life.

"Was the ski-ing good this year?" she asked, as he set her coffee on the table.

"I believe so. I'm not much of a hand at it myself," he said, settling in the basket chair with his own drink. "It's like riding, you know. To be a first-class performer you have to start young."

"Yes, I suppose you're right. But it must be a heavenly sensation, sweeping down those fast runs," Clodagh said absently, remembering the towering peaks, the jingling of sleigh bells, and the cold, pure mountain air.

As if he read her thoughts, Simon said, "It must be lonely for you here with your brother and Deirdre away. Do you have someone to take over and give you a break occasionally?"

She shook her head. "But I'm too busy to be lonely," she said, smiling. "Liam is only forty miles away. He comes home most weekends. It may seem a dull life to you, but I don't mind it. I suppose I'm just a natural stay-at-home."

"It's lucky for the others that you are. Why sound so apologetic?"

"Well, most girls want careers and have lots of ambitions."

"Most girls want to marry," he answered, in a dry tone. "I'd say you had a head start in that field."

"Oh, you mean 'the way to a man's heart is through his stomach'?" Clodagh said, with a laugh. "I don't think that follows nowadays. Several of Liam's friends have married girls who couldn't poach an egg at first. They fell in love with the girls, not their cooking. Actually lots of men don't care for fancy cooking. They're much happier with roast beef. My father was like that. Olive oil and garlic made him shudder. He thought a sauce was made to disguise something that was 'off'."

Simon grinned. Then his expression grew serious again. "No, I wasn't really thinking about your cooking," he said slowly. "I meant all the other things which are so unusual about you."

"Unusual? About me?" Clodagh looked startled.

"Perhaps they are not so much unusual among girls in the provinces, but they are rare enough in London and New York," he said, in a sardonic tone.

"What do you mean? What kind of things?" she asked, mystified.

He seemed to be considering. After a moment, he said, "You are so natural, so feminine."

She was completely taken aback. If she had ever had to describe herself in one word, she would have chosen "domesticated." She thought of a "feminine" girl as someone appealing, but slightly helpless and silly. Someone who wore filmy evening dresses, and flower scents and tinkling bracelets.

"You look faintly insulted," Simon said, in an amused tone. "But by feminine I wasn't implying featherbrained. I mean that you are the type of girl who is happy if she makes her husband happy. So few women seem to be satisfied with that nowadays."

"Oh, surely not?" Clodagh said, in confusion. "I think you are too cynical."

"Perhaps," he said negligently. Then, "Here, let me beat those eggs for you. It looks hard work."

When Deirdre came down, she looked none too pleased to find Simon with a mixing bowl on his knees, telling her sister about some of the unusual dishes he had tried on a trip to the Greek islands the year before.

"Why on earth don't you get an electric mixer, Clo?" she asked, with a trace of sharpness. And, later, when Simon was out of earshot, "Darling, must we talk about food all the time? Men aren't madly interested in recipes, you know, and I don't want Simon to be bored."

SOON after lunch there was a hail-storm followed by sleet. Deirdre prowled restlessly about, bemoaning the lack of a television set. But Simon seemed content to play Monopoly with the boys. If he was bored, he certainly did not show it, thought Clodagh as she turned one of Liam's shirt collars.

Immediately after tea Deirdre went up to pack her case. Clodagh had expected them to stay until the following morning, but her sister said she had an early booking and must get back to town that night.

On Tuesday morning, the post brought a slim package addressed in a hand which was strange to her. Inside, she found a book of traditional Greek recipes and a bread-and-butter note from Simon. She was touched that he should have taken the trouble to find such a personal thank-you present.

During the week, her brother Liam came home for a night. He looked tired, even haggard. When Clodagh remarked that he seemed a bit rundown, he said he had had a touch of flu the week before.

But she suspected that it was something deeper than post-flu depression that made him unusually preoccupied and taciturn. She also noticed that he never once referred to Mary Ferguson, a girl who had joined his research team in the autumn and whom he had previously mentioned rather frequently. Clodagh wondered if he could be in love with Mary, but felt barred from telling her so because of his family commitments.

On the day before Paul was due back, Clodagh spent an infuriating afternoon preparing an extremely elaborate dinner for a woman who kept peering suspiciously into the kitchen as if she expected to find her taking illicit swigs of sherry.

It was past nine when Clodagh finished washing up the dishes. Tired and dispirited, she let herself out of the house and put up her umbrella. There was a car drawn up to the kerb outside the gate, but she did not recognise it until the nearside door swung open and someone called her name.

"Simon! What on earth are you doing here?" she exclaimed.

"Hop in, girl. You'll be soaked," Simon said briskly.

Clodagh furled her umbrella, and climbed into the passenger seat. "Is Deirdre home again? She didn't ring up," she said.

He started the engine. "As far as I know Deirdre is down in Torquay this week. They're hoping to take some beachwear shots."

"Oh, poor old Dee! Even if the rain stops, it will still be much too chilly for prancing about in swimsuits," Clodagh said, with a shiver.

"Models have to be tough," Simon remarked, without sympathy.

"But if Dee isn't with you, why are you here?" Clodagh did not notice that, instead of turning right at the roundabout, he was following the road into town.

"I've been in these parts all the week, so I thought I'd look you up on my way back to town," Simon said casually. "I'm staying the night at the *Bell* in Market Square. When I called at your house Rory told me you were working, and as it's such a filthy night I thought you might be glad of a lift."

"I am delighted. How kind of you. Had you been waiting ages?"

"No, not long." They stopped at traffic lights and he turned his head to look at her. "Have you had anything to eat yourself?"

"Only snippets. I'll fry some bacon and eggs when we get home." Clodagh settled herself more comfortably against the luxurious leather upholstery, and closed her eyes for a moment.

CHAPTER III

WHEN the car stopped again, she thought they had reached the house. It was not until Simon came round to open the door for her, and she was swinging her legs out, that she realised they were not in Chestnut Lane but in the car park of the town's best restaurant.

"Oh, Simon—" she began.

"Don't fuss. I booked a table earlier on," he said, taking her arm and hurrying her towards the entrance.

"But I'm not dressed for dining out," she protested.

"Nor am I," he said equably. "Go and put your coat in the cloakroom. What would you like to drink?"

"Oh, anything." Since it was clearly futile to argue, Clodagh did as he told her and made for the door marked Powder Room.

Some time later, fortified by an excellent lobster *bisque*, Clodagh no longer minded that she was the only woman present who had not been to the hairdresser that day.

"Oh, Simon, this is heavenly. I was feeling so cross and depressed when you picked me up, and now I feel on top of the world," she said.

He smiled at her, his grey eyes teasing. "Is that entirely due to having had a good meal—or can I take some of the credit for boosting your morale?"

"If it were not for you, I wouldn't be here."

"That's evading the question. I want to know if you are glad to see me again? If you hoped I would come back?" he persisted, with a quizzical gleam.

She felt herself beginning to blush, and hoped the rosy lamp light would disguise it. "Of course I am glad to see you," she answered quickly. "How long are you staying? For one night?"

"No, for several nights, I hope. The boys both have lunch at school, don't they? I thought tomorrow we might run over to the coast for an hour or two. Do you like the sea at this time of year, or does the idea appal you?"

"I'd love it, but . . ." Clodagh caught her breath. How strange that he should suggest a day at the sea—an unlikely proposal at this season, yet one she would dearly love to accept.

Years ago, when she was still at school, her father had sometimes said, "Come on, Clo, let's run over to the coast and get some good fresh air in our lungs." This was usually on a cold Sunday afternoon, when the rest of the family preferred to stay by the fire and play rummy. But her father had been born on the rugged coast of Donegal. The sea was in his blood and Clodagh's.

Now, remembering those happy afternoons on some deserted and windswept beach, the salt spray stinging her cheeks, a grey sea breaking wildly on the shingle, she felt reckless. "All right, I'll be ready at ten," she said eagerly. "I could pack a picnic lunch, if you like."

"Good idea." Simon turned away to ask a passing waiter to bring them some more coffee. Then he said, "If the light is any good tomorrow, I'd like to take some shots of you."

"Shots?"

"Photographs," he explained.

"Why, yes . . . if you wish," she said, surprised. "Are you keen on photography?"

"It's my living," he told her, with a smile.

"Oh, I'm sorry . . . I thought—that is, I didn't know."

"That's how I met Deirdre," he explained.

"You work on a fashion magazine?"

"No, I'm a freelance. I have to do fashion photography to keep my bread buttered, but I prefer to take pictures of real people."

"What do you mean . . . real people?" she asked curiously.

He was silent for a moment. Then he said slowly, "People who have character in their faces. You are a real person, Clodagh."

She did not know what to say. His tone and the way he looked at her had an effect which was quite new and a little frightening. Suddenly, her heart was thudding as if . . . as if he had kissed me, she thought, trembling. *And I want him to kiss me. I want it terribly.*

"It is getting late. I had better take you home," Simon said, after a glance at his watch.

OUTSIDE the restaurant they found that the rain had stopped. The night air was cool and refreshing, and a church clock was beginning to strike eleven.

Simon unlocked the car, and reached under the dashboard for a cloth to wipe the misted windows. He had unfastened the door on her side, but Clodagh did not immediately climb in. A fat black cat had run out of the shadows, and was rubbing itself against her legs, purring. As Simon came round to clean the passenger side of the windscreen, she bent to tickle the cat's ears.

"He looks very well fed." Simon also crouched down to stroke the cat.

His fingers touched hers, lingered, and held. Slowly, he drew her upright

and into his arms. At first his lips brushed gently over her cheek. Then he tightened his hold, and found her mouth.

Almost at once he let her go again. "Clodagh darling, what's the matter?" he asked huskily.

"I'm sorry. Please take me home," she said, in an anguished whisper.

The bus service had finished, and there were only a few other cars about. It took them less than ten minutes to drive from the town centre to the Devlins' house on the outskirts. But, to Clodagh, the drive seemed interminable. She did not dare to glance at Simon—Deirdre's man—but she could guess what he must think of her, and she had never felt so agonisingly ashamed of herself. When they reached the house she half expected him to allow her time to get out and then drive away in disgust. But he switched off the engine, and leaned across to open the nearside door. He reached the garden gate before she did, held it open, and switched on a torch to light the path.

Clodagh fumbled in her bag for her key, and he shone the torch on the latch so that she could see to unlock the front door. She pushed the door open, felt for the hall light switch, and waited on the step for some scathing parting shot.

"Clodagh, look at me," Simon said.

And, when she raised her eyes to meet his, there was no coldness or contempt in his face, only a smile that was half-teasing, half-tender.

"Are you under the impression that you have been poaching on Deirdre's preserves?" he asked dryly. "Do you really believe that I would come down here to see you if I were already involved with your sister? Oh, Clodagh—what a little goose you are. There is nothing between Deirdre and me. Surely she did not give you any other impression?"

Before Clodagh could answer him, a car turned into the road and stopped behind Simon's. It was Paul's.

"Where the devil have you been, Clodagh?" he demanded, as he came up the path. "I've been searching everywhere for you."

"Paul! I thought you weren't coming home till tomorrow," Clodagh exclaimed.

"I was able to get away early. I came straight here from the station, but the boys said you were working. When I went to the address they gave me, I was told you had left soon after nine," he told her furiously. "I thought you must have had an accident."

"But didn't Rory tell you that Simon had fetched me? Oh, Simon, this is Paul Bentley. Paul . . . Simon Rand."

Simon held out his hand, but Paul ignored it. He acknowledged the introduction with a glare. Clodagh had never seen him angry before.

"Do you realise what time it is?" he snapped at her. "You've been missing for over two hours. If I didn't find you here, I was going to the police."

"I think that would have been unnecessarily alarmist, Bentley," Simon said coolly. "After all it is only half-past eleven, and Clodagh isn't a schoolgirl. Didn't it occur to you that she might have a date, or be visiting friends?"

"No, it did not," Paul said thickly.

For one ghastly moment, Clodagh thought he was going to knock Simon down, or attempt it.

But Paul managed to hold his fury short of violence. "I don't know what the

devil it has to do with you, but I think most men would feel pretty concerned if their fiancée failed to come home on time and was not in the habit of staying out half the night," he countered icily.

Simon's eyes narrowed suddenly. He turned to look searchingly at Clodagh. "Yes . . . of course. My mistake," he said flatly. Then he strode down the path and disappeared.

"Who is that chap? Why didn't the boys tell me you were with him?" Paul asked tersely.

Clodagh sagged against the jamb of the door. She felt drained of all vitality, exhausted.

"I—I don't know," she said unsteadily. "Simon is a friend of Dee's. I'd had a rotten evening so he took me to Grundy's for a meal. If you'd wired me you were coming, I'd have been here."

"But I don't understand why—" Paul began, frowning. Then he saw that she was shivering and his expression changed from annoyance to anxiety. "You're cold. You'd better go in. I'm sorry if I snarled at you, Clo. But I was so darned worried about you."

To her profound relief he did not ask if he could come into the house. "Well, I'll see you tomorrow," he said. "Goodnight, my dear."

CLODAGH was up at her usual time next morning and, when the boys came down for breakfast, they did not notice that she was clumsy with fatigue.

"Paul came round last night, Clo," Rory said.

"I know. He came back after you were in bed. Why didn't you tell him I would be with Simon?"

"Didn't get a chance. He asked where you were, and buzzed off. Is Simon coming to supper tonight?"

Clodagh shook her head. "He's going back to London today." Perhaps he has already gone, she thought bleakly.

When the boys had left for school, she forced herself to start the routine chores although she longed to take a couple of aspirins and go back to bed.

When, about ten o'clock, the door bell rang, she thought it must be Paul, and hastily powdered her face and put on lipstick. But it was Simon who stood on the step.

"May I come in?" he asked. Without waiting for permission, he stepped past her, and walked through to the kitchen.

After a moment Clodagh shut the door and followed him. "What do you want?" she asked stiffly.

"To talk to you. You didn't expect me to leave without seeing you again, did you?"

"Simon, please—"

"Are you really engaged to Bentley?" Simon asked. "You don't wear a ring. You've never mentioned him."

The kettle began to whistle, and Clodagh hurried to turn off the gas. Standing with her back to him, she said unsteadily. "It—it isn't official."

He caught her by the shoulders and swung her round. "Don't prevaricate,

Clodagh. He may have asked you to marry him, but I can't believe you have accepted. You are not the kind of girl who promises herself to one man, and then encourages another."

She shook off his hands and dodged behind the wide kitchen table. "I didn't encourage you," she said fiercely. "I didn't ask you to come back. I . . . I scarcely know you."

"You agreed to come out with me today." He followed her round the table until she was trapped between the dresser and the sink, and could retreat no farther. "Tell me you're in love with him," he demanded. "Go on . . . say it, Clodagh. Say it."

She wanted to say it, but she could not. She had never been able to lie boldly and convincingly.

"Being 'in love' is not the only thing which counts," she answered. "There are other things which matter just as much. You wouldn't understand. You have only yourself to consider."

His expression sharpened suddenly, as if something he had not been able to understand was at last becoming clear to him.

After a pause, he said, "Has Bentley some connection with that big factory on the ring road?"

"Yes, it was founded by his grandfather," Clodagh replied stiffly.

"I see—so he is something of a 'catch'? How very obtuse of me. I never even considered that you might be the gold-digging type."

Her mouth quivered, but she set her teeth, and managed to shrug and look unmoved. But she was not prepared for him to catch her hands and grip them hard in his.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I shouldn't have said that. You aren't thinking of yourself, but of the boys. Oh, Clodagh, you can't go through with it. You can't marry a man you don't love for the sake of your family. It would be madness . . . sheer madness."

"No—this is madness," she cried vehemently. "Oh, go away, Simon, please go. I—I wish you had never come here."

He stared at her, his eyes narrowed. He was oddly white about the mouth. "Very well," he said, at last. "I'll go. But if anything should change . . . If you should ever need me . . ."

He bent and pressed his lips against her knuckles. Clodagh felt as if her heart were being torn out.

His face looking curiously haggard, Simon gave her a bleak smile. "Goodbye, Clodagh. Good luck," he said huskily. Then he was gone, closing the front door quietly behind him.

Some time later, Clodagh dried her eyes. She drank a glass of water. Then she went into the sitting-room, picked up the telephone receiver and dialled the number of the factory.

When she heard Paul's voice, she drew a deep, shuddering breath and said, "Paul? It's Clodagh here. I—I just wanted to tell you that I've made up my mind. I will marry you."

CHAPTER IV

THREE weeks before her wedding, Clodagh went to London with Paul's aunt. Miss Bentley had insisted on giving her a wedding dress. Not one chosen at any of the local bridal departments, but a gown to be specially designed by a famous Mayfair *couturier*.

"Please, my dear, it will give me so much pleasure," Miss Bentley had urged, when Clodagh had been reluctant to accept.

So Clodagh had consented, and today she was to have the final fitting.

"Oh, Clodagh, you look enchanting. I can't wait for Paul to see you. He'll be spellbound," Miss Bentley said delightedly, when they were in the designer's elegant green and gold salon, and Clodagh had paced slowly back and forth over the thick, soft carpet so that the fitter could make sure that every fold hung perfectly.

Staring at her reflection in one of the long gilded mirrors, Clodagh felt rather spellbound herself. Could this ethereal vision in the glass really be herself—ordinary Clo Devlin? True, she had lost some weight recently, but it was the dress which made her look so willowy and graceful, like a pale snow maiden in a fairy tale.

"It's beautiful. I don't know how to thank you," she said shakily.

"You can thank me by making Paul happy, as I know you will, my dear. He's a lucky boy," Miss Bentley said briskly, patting her arm.

After they had lunched together, Miss Bentley went off to her hair stylist, and Clodagh took a taxi to Knightsbridge to buy some beach clothes for her honeymoon.

It was a cold day, with cutting draughts blowing round the corners of the streets. But she was protected from the wind by a sealskin jacket which had been one of Paul's several engagement presents. His ring—a magnificent marquise diamond—made a bump under her glove.

She had left the store, and was hovering on the pavement, wondering what to do until it was time to meet Miss Bentley for tea, when someone said, "Hello, Clodagh." Turning, she found Simon standing beside her.

The shock of seeing him again so unexpectedly had the impact of a violent physical blow. She recoiled, her breath sharply indrawn, her face stricken. Then she began to tremble.

Perhaps he thought she was merely cold. He did not seem shaken at meeting her.

He said, "It's too chilly to stand about. Come and have some tea." And, before she could recover her voice, he had taken her arm, and was steering her towards a nearby café.

"How are you?" he asked, when they were seated at a table by the window, and he had ordered tea.

"I . . . I'm well. How are you?" she stammered nervously, carefully easing off each finger of her brown suède gloves so that she need not meet his eyes for a moment longer than necessary.

"I'm alive," he said tersely. Then, when Clodagh flickered a frightened glance at his face, he asked, "How are the boys?"

She seized the opening eagerly, telling him how Con had sprained his wrist falling out of a tree, and how Rory was hoping to go on a school visit to France in the summer holidays. She was terrified that he might suddenly ask her something much more personal. What a fool she had been to let him bring her here.

But after that one curt answer, Simon behaved as if there had never been anything between them but the most casual and uncomplicated friendship.

They talked of everything but themselves . . . the weather, the latest international *débâcle*, a new play Simon had seen, a book Clodagh had read recently.

At four o'clock, she said, "I must go now. I have to meet a friend."

"Are you staying in town overnight?" Simon asked.

"No, we just came up for a day's shopping. It—it's been nice to see you, Simon. Thank you for tea. Do you mind if I dash off now? I have to get back to Piccadilly by four fifteen."

"I'll see you into a taxi," he said, rising and paying the bill.

They had to wait in the street for nearly five minutes before an empty cab came along. Clodagh was intensely aware of Simon's hand hooked lightly inside her elbow.

"Where to?" he asked, when at last a taxi pulled in to the kerb.

"Fortnum's, please. Can I give you a lift?" Her voice was sharp with strain.

He shook his head, told the driver where to take her, and opened the rear door. But when she bent to step inside, he held her back.

"Clodagh, I—" He did not go on, but neither did he release his hold on her arm. "When is the wedding?" he asked tonelessly.

"Next month. Goodbye, Simon." She tore herself free and dived into the taxi.

For a moment she thought he was going to follow her. But then he closed the door, and stepped back from the edge of the pavement. As the taxi joined the flow of buses and cars, she turned for one final glimpse of him. But already he had disappeared.

ON the train journey home, Miss Bentley read a library book and Clodagh pretended to doze. When they had met, the older woman remarked that Clodagh looked pale, but had accepted the explanation that the stuffy atmosphere in the stores had given her a headache. Listening to the monotonous rhythm of the wheels rattling over the points, Clodagh remembered how, only a few hours earlier, she had paraded in the beautiful organza wedding dress.

'I must have been mad,' she thought. 'Oh, how am I going to tell Paul that I've been living a lie . . . and that I can't go on?'

Now, with terrible clarity, she saw that to marry Paul while another man still held her heart was not merely to sacrifice herself, but to ruin both their lives. For it was not true, as she had obstinately tried to delude herself, that her feelings for Simon had weakened in the weeks since she had last seen him. Tonight, after meeting him again, she felt as lost and tormented as on the day she had sent him away.

Well, there was no cure for that—except time, perhaps. But, even if she could never go to Simon, she could no longer face a life of deliberate deception. Somehow she had to find the moral courage to tell Paul the truth. At once.

Paul was at the station to meet them. He dropped his aunt at her flat (Miss Bentley had declined to join them for supper) and then drove to Clodagh's house.

The boys had already had their meal, and were busy with homework in the sitting-room. Clodagh went upstairs to wash and change. When she came down, Paul had put on the kettle and was sitting reading the evening paper.

"Are you hungry? What would you like?" she asked, in a taut voice.

"Oh, anything will do," he murmured abstractedly.

Dreading what she must tell him, Clodagh laid two places at the other end of the table, then lit the grill. Suddenly, Paul pushed back his chair and stood up.

"Clo . . . we've got to call it off," he said abruptly.

She stared at him, shocked and mystified. "Call it off?"

Paul thrust his hands into his trouser pockets and moved restlessly about between the sink and the dresser. "The wedding," he said crisply. "What else?"

Speechless, Clodagh gazed at him.

"It's no use pretending any longer," Paul went on heavily. "I suppose I've known all along it wouldn't work, but I refused to face it. Tonight, at the station, I had no choice. You walked down the platform looking as if you had been to a funeral." There was no bitterness in his tone, only the flatness of resignation.

"Oh, Paul, I'm so sorry," Clodagh whispered.

"It's not your fault my dear," he said wryly. "I knew what had happened as soon as I came back from Belgium. I was a fool not to accept the situation. I hoped it might be . . . a nine days' wonder," he ended, with a rueful shrug.

"You *knew*—but how could you?" she exclaimed.

He turned away to tip ash into a tray. Then he stood with his back to her, staring out of the window into the darkness of the garden.

"Oh, Clodagh—how could I miss it?" he said, at length. "You'd changed . . . you were like another girl. Any fool would have guessed what had happened." He turned to face her again. "There is one thing I don't know. Does this Rand fellow care for you, too?"

When she did not answer, he said, "I know he came to see you the morning after I got back from Brussels. I came round myself. When I saw his car outside I went away again. What happened, Clo?"

"He . . . he more or less said he loved me." Her answer was barely audible because her throat was so tight with shame and misery.

"So you sent him packing and committed yourself to me," Paul said sardonically. "That wasn't very sensible, was it?"

"I—I thought it was just a crazy infatuation," she said wretchedly. "I didn't mean to deceive you, Paul. Oh, how can I make you understand . . ."

To her astonishment, he moved round the table and took her hands gently in his. "I think I do understand. I think, deep down, I've always known that if you married me it would be chiefly for the sake of Rory and Con. You needn't look so anguished, Clo. It is not as if you had ever pretended to be in love with me. In fact you warned me that you were not."

Her eyes filled with tears. "Please, Paul, don't be kind," she said, in a choked voice. "I would rather you despised me. I deserve it."

"Tell me something: would you have gone through with it if I hadn't said anything?"

She shook her head. "No . . . I was going to tell you after supper. I realised today how hopeless it was to go on. Oh, Paul, can you ever forgive me?"

"There is nothing to forgive," he said gently. "These things aren't voluntary. They just happen."

"I feel utterly despicable," she said, in a whisper.

He was still holding her hands, and now he tipped up her chin and made her look at him.

"Listen to me, Clo," he said, his tone suddenly stern. "If you really love this chap, you must tell him so. The boys won't be dependant on you forever, and they certainly won't thank you if you wreck your whole life on their account. I am sure you can work something out."

He let go of her hands, and moved away to pick up his coat and gloves. "I think you owe it to me to try to find some solution," he said gravely. "Goodbye, Clodagh. Good luck."

IN the days that followed, Clodagh tried to still her mental unrest in physical effort. She cleaned the house from top to bottom, painted the hall, and spent a whole day baking for one of her neighbours who was organising a whist drive for charity.

But, in spite of all this extra work, she found it hard to sleep at night. Her longing to be with Simon nagged her unceasingly.

CHAPTER V

SUDDENLY, overnight, spring came. The air softened, the sun coaxed tight buds into pale green leaf, and the market flower stalls were massed with daffodils and jonquils. Women who, a week ago, had been trudging round the shops in fur boots and woolly hats, began to appear in the new season's suits.

The coming of spring made Clodagh doubly restless. She found herself snapping at the boys for the most trifling misdemeanours, and boiling with unreasonable resentment because other people were cheerfully looking ahead to summer holidays. Her own future seemed an endless void of loneliness.

One morning, waking up, she knew she could not stand it any longer. Without Simon she was only half alive.

At breakfast, she told Rory and Con that she was going to London for the day. As soon as they had gone to school, she hurried upstairs to change. Then she caught a bus to the station. It was a few minutes past ten when the train pulled into the cavernous grey gloom of King's Cross Station. Clodagh made straight for a telephone booth to find a directory. She jotted down Simon's address, and hurried to find a taxi.

The drive seemed interminable, and Clodagh stared unseeingly out of the window, her hands clenched tightly in her lap, her heart thumping. If only she was not too late. What if Simon had gone abroad again?

At last, somewhere off Sloane Square, the taxi drew up outside a large, modern block of flats. By now she was in such a state of panic that, paying the fare, she dropped her purse and had to scrabble for scattered coins.

There was a lift in the entrance hall, but as she did not know which floor she wanted Clodagh took the stairs. Flat 24 was three flights up, on the topmost landing. Before she pressed the bell, she took a deep steady breath, and tried to look calm and composed.

It was several minutes before she heard movements inside the flat and, as she heard the latch click, she braced herself.

"Clodagh!" Simon said blankly.

She swallowed, her cheeks flaming. "H—hello, Simon."

Evidently he had only just got up, and had been washing or shaving when she rang. His hair was wet, and he was wearing the shabby blue dressing-gown she had seen once before. After staring at her in frowning perplexity for some seconds, he stepped back to let her enter.

Beyond the narrow hall, another door led into a large sitting-room.

"I—I know I shouldn't have come here, but I had to see you," Clodagh murmured uncomfortably.

"Sit down. I'll go and dress," Simon said briefly.

Perching on the edge of a long, four-seater sofa she surveyed her surroundings with a growing interest.

The flat was not at all as she had visualised it—a comfortless pokey sort of place with dingy curtains, and bachelor clutter everywhere. In fact this was one of the most attractive rooms she had ever seen, she realised with a shock. Tall windows spanned two sides and gave a panoramic view of roofs, spires and tree-tops. A third wall was ranged with custom-built bookshelves, and oiled teak record cabinets. The carpet was a rich olive green Wilton, and there was a handsome, carved pine mantelpiece over the electric wall fire. The sofa and chairs were covered in honey-coloured tweed with vivid, persimmon cushions.

It was nearly ten minutes before Simon came back, dressed, and carrying a tray.

"I was out late last night. I haven't had breakfast yet," he said, pouring two cups of coffee and handing one to her. "Would you like some toast?"

Clodagh shook her head. "No, thank you. I'm not hungry."

There was a silence while Simon buttered his toast with unnerving calm and she sat there, tongue-tied, waiting for him to give her some lead.

At last, he said coolly, "Well . . . What can I do for you, Clodagh?"

She licked her dry lips. Suddenly she could not remember a word of any of the things she had intended to say. She began to tremble violently.

"I'm free," she blurted hoarsely, "I'm not going to marry Paul."

Simon turned his head and looked at her, his expression unreadable. For one agonising moment she thought he must have changed his mind . . . that she no longer meant anything to him.

He took the cup and saucer away from her. "Does that mean you want to marry me now?" he asked evenly.

She could not look at him. "If you still want me," she whispered.

"What about the boys?"

"I don't know. I—I only know that I love you . . . more than anything." The

words were barely audible and, as soon as she had said them, she jumped up, and stumbled blindly towards the door. She felt sick with humiliation.

Simon caught her, and swung her round to face him. "Say that again," he ordered fiercely. Then he kissed her.

A LONG time later, Clodagh laid her cheek against his shoulder and gave a deep sigh. "Oh, Simon, what a fool I've been," she murmured contritely.

He put her gently away from him. "Sweet, I hate to leave you, but I have an appointment which I must keep. Why don't you potter round the shops for an hour, and then we'll have lunch and I'll drive you home."

"I'll see if Dee is at home," Clodagh decided.

Deirdre was also in a dressing-gown when she answered the door. But this was because she had a heavy cold and was spending the day in bed.

"Did Paul bring you up?" she asked throatily.

Wondering how Deirdre would react, Clodagh told her the news.

Deirdre was incredulous. But, after she had recovered from the initial shock, she said reflectively, "As a matter of fact I've always suspected that Simon was basically the devoted husband-and-father type. At any rate, I never got very far with him."

"Did you want to?" Clodagh asked.

Deirdre shook her head. "Only professionally. He isn't my type."

Clodagh went to the kitchen to make breakfast.

Presently, while Deirdre was eating, Clodagh said, "Simon and I haven't discussed anything yet, so I don't know if he will agree to live in our house until the boys have finished school. I don't see how we can possibly move to London. I am sure there is not enough room for all three of us in his flat. Dee, do you think you could manage to put a little more into the kitty each month? It is so hard on Liam having to give up nearly all his salary, and we can't expect Simon to provide for the boys as well as for me. It wouldn't be fair."

Deirdre stared at her for a moment before she answered. "I don't see why not," she said. "Paul was going to take the boys on, wasn't he? I thought that was the main reason you agreed to marry him."

Clodagh flushed and bit her lip. "Paul had a big house and was very well off."

"Well, Simon is not exactly a pauper."

"Maybe not, but his income must be rather erratic," Clodagh said worriedly. "But perhaps he will try to get a staff job now."

Deirdre's eyebrows lifted. "Clo, you do know who Simon is, don't you?" she asked, looking puzzled.

"How do you mean?"

Suddenly Deirdre began to laugh. It was several minutes before she could speak intelligibly.

"Oh, Clo—how absolutely priceless," she exclaimed weakly. "You're madly in love with the man—and you don't know the first thing about him. Here, take a look at this."

She reached for one of the pile of fashion journals on the bedside table and flipped over the pages. Then she showed her sister a photograph of a glamorous

French ball dress, and pointed a long lacquered nail at the name in the margin. "Do you see who took this? Your Simon, my innocent. In fact, if you look through any of the glossies, you'll find half the best pictures are by 'Rand.' He's a sort of photographic Escoffier—and his fees must be enormous. Don't you see, that's why I wanted to make a hit with him. As Simon's pet model I'd be made for life."

"You mean he's famous?" Clodagh asked, stunned.

"Very," her sister said succinctly.

"**B**UT why didn't you tell me you were *the* Simon Rand?" Clodagh asked, when he returned to the flat to find her waiting in a fever of impatience for him. He put his hands on her shoulders and grinned. "Does the fact that I'm fairly successful put you off me?" he inquired quizzically.

"No, of course not—but what can you possibly see in me?" she said doubtfully. "Won't people think it very odd for you to marry someone so ordinary?"

"Not when they discover what a splendid cook you are," he teased her. "Look, as I was held up and it is rather late to go to a restaurant, do you think you can rustle up a meal from whatever is in the 'fridge?"

"I expect so." Clodagh followed him into the kitchen.

She must have looked a little doleful because, as she turned up the cuffs of her blouse, Simon took her in his arms. "Darling Clo, I wouldn't care if you couldn't even peel a potato," he told her softly. "I love you because . . . you are you."

And, as he bent his head to kiss her, all Clodagh's doubts dissolved, and she knew that there were no rational explanations for love. It was just love. And, at last, it was hers.

THE END

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